

Women in Colonial America

Early life in the American colonies was hard—everyone had to pitch in to produce the necessities of life. There was little room for slackers; as John Smith decreed in the Virginia colony, “He who does not work, will not eat.” Because men outnumbered women by a significant margin in the early southern colonies, life there, especially family life, was relatively unstable. But the general premise that all colonials had to work to ensure survival meant that everyone, male and female, had to do one’s job. The work required to sustain a family in the rather bleak environments of the early colonies was demanding for all.

While the women had to sew, cook, take care of domestic animals, make many of the necessities used in the household such as soap, candles, clothing, and other necessities, the men were busy building, plowing, repairing tools, harvesting crops, hunting, fishing, and protecting the family from whatever threat might come, from wild animals to Indians. It was true that the colonists brought with them traditional attitudes about the proper status and roles of women. Women were considered to be the “weaker vessels,” not as strong physically or mentally as men and less emotionally stable. Legally they could neither vote, own property, hold public office, nor participate in legal matters on their own behalf, and opportunities for them outside the home were frequently limited. Women were expected to defer to their husbands and be obedient to them without question. Husbands, in turn, were expected to protect their wives against all threats, even at the cost of their own lives if necessary.

Women’s adult lives, at least between the ages of 20 and 45, and sometimes earlier, was characterized by motherhood: Most women, most of the time, were either pregnant or nursing, and sometimes both. On average, women had about nine children, and about 90-95% of women bore children.

It is clear that separation of labor existed in the New World—women did traditional work generally associated with females. But because labor was so valuable in colonial America, many women were able to demonstrate their worth by pursuing positions such as midwives, merchants, printers, and even doctors. In addition, because the survival of the family depended upon the contribution of every family member—including children, once they were old enough to work—women often had to step in to their husband’s roles in case of incapacitation from injury or illness. Women were commonly able to contribute to the labor involved in farming by attending the births of

livestock, driving plow horses, and so on. Because the family was the main unit of society, and was especially strong in New England, the wife's position within the family, while subordinate to that of her husband, nevertheless meant that through her husband she could participate in the public life of the colony. It was assumed, for example, that when a man cast a vote in any sort of election, the vote was cast on behalf of his family. If the husband were indisposed at the time of the election, wives were generally allowed to cast the family vote in his place.

Women were in short supply in the colonies, as indeed was all labor, so they tended to be more highly valued than in Europe. The wife was an essential component of the nuclear family, and without a strong and productive wife a family would struggle to survive. If a woman became a widow, for example, suitors would appear with almost unseemly haste to bid for the services of the woman through marriage. (In the Virginia colony it was bantered about that when a single man showed up with flowers at the funeral of a husband, he was more likely to be courting than mourning or offering condolences.)

Religion in Puritan New England followed congregational traditions, meaning that the church hierarchy was not as highly developed as in the Anglican and Catholic faiths. New England women tended to join the church in greater numbers than men, a phenomenon known as the "feminization" of religion, although it is not clear how that came about. In general, colonial women fared well for the times in which they lived. In any case the lead in the family practice of religion in New England was often taken by the wife. It was the mother who brought up the children to be good Christians, and the mother who often taught them to read so that they could study the Bible. Because both men and women were required to live according to God's law, both boys and girls were taught to read the Bible.

The feminization of religion in New England set an important precedent for what later became known as "Republican motherhood" during the Revolutionary period. Because mothers were responsible for the raising of good Christian children, as the religious intensity of Puritan New England tapered off, it was the mother who was later expected to raise children who were ethically sound, and who would become good citizens. When the American Revolution shifted responsibility for the moral condition of the state from the monarch to "we, the people," the raising of children to become good citizens became a political contribution of good "republican" mothers.

Despite the traditional restrictions on colonial women, many examples

can be found indicating that women were often granted legal and economic rights and were allowed to pursue businesses; many women were more than mere housewives, and their responsibilities were important and often highly valued in colonial society. They appeared in court, conducted business, and participated in public affairs from time to time, circumstances warranting. Although women in colonial America could by no means be considered to have been held "equal" to men, they were as a rule probably as well off as women anywhere in the world, and in general probably even better off.